

Stumbling on Technology: Erkki Karu's Notion of Rapid Shooting and the Lack of Telephoto Lenses

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Filmmaking, possibly more than any other art, is dependent on technology. It is impossible to conceive of cinema without it, as it cannot exist apart from its apparatus. Technology both enables filmmaking and sets limits for what filmmakers can achieve. As Henry Bacon argues, throughout film history, artists working in other media have influenced filmmakers. Indeed, one can easily be inspired by literature or painting to write a dramatic film sequence, but unless the screenwriter is sensitive to cinema's technological limitations, it may be that the sequence cannot be executed as planned. Erkki Karu, enthused by various representations of climactic rapid shooting, learned this the hard way, as he made his first feature length film.

The Logroller's Bride (*Koskenlaskijan morsian*), which was written and directed by Karu for Suomi-Filmi in 1923, was the first Finnish log driver film. The genre is both intermedial and transnational. Karu based his film on Väinö Kataja's popular novel of the same name. In the field of cinema, the film was preceded by *The Song of the Scarlett Flower* (*Sången om den eldröda blomman*), a Swedish adaptation of Johannes Linnankoski's novel *Laulu tulipunaisesta kukasta*, which Mauritz Stiller directed for Svenska Biografteatern in 1919. *The Song of the Scarlett Flower* is one of the most respected films of the golden age of Swedish cinema (1916–1924) that set the model for Finnish national cinema. Inspired by Linnankoski's literary representations, Stiller managed to turn rapid shooting into electrifying popular cinema. In the key sequence in the film, Olof Koskela, the protagonist, bravely balances on a floating log in the midst of a strong stream. The rapid shooting sequence was an attraction that was shot with several cameras from river banks in long shots and extreme long shots. The large shot scales do a good job in representing the stream and the surrounding landscape, but they do not allow the audience to see Olof's facial expressions, the movements of his body or the waves crashing against him. The dramatic impact of the sequence is not as strong as it could have been, had the camera been closer.

Stiller used a new tactic in *Johan*, an adaptation of Juhani Aho's novel *Juba*, in 1921. In the key turning point of the film, a handsome stranger takes Johan's wife Maria away on a boat. What follows is a long and

thrilling rapid shooting sequence. It was shot from a raft that was attached to the boat where the characters were located. This innovative solution made it possible to have the camera with the characters in the dangerous situation. As the sequence is shot in long shots and full shots, the audience can pay attention to the facial and bodily expressions of the characters. Because of this, the emotional impact of the sequence is significantly stronger than that of the earlier film, as shots of Maria screaming as high waves hit the boat significantly heighten the drama.



In Finland, *The Song of the Scarlet Flower* and *Johan* were huge critical and commercial successes. Some film critics even argued that the films were actually Finnish, as they are based on Finnish novels. Stiller was discussed as a fellow countryman, as he had been born and raised in Finland and thus he knew the country well. As a Russian Jew, he moved to Sweden in order to escape military service in the tsar's army. *Johan* also stars Urho Somersalmi who was a distinguished actor in the Finnish National Theatre. Those working in the Finnish film business were envious that Swedes had managed to film the canonical novels

before Finns, as Outi Hupaniittu argues. It may have seemed to some that Sweden was treating Finland as its satellite. As the country had only recently gained its independence, national spirits were high. Against this background, it is understandable that Karu wanted to outdo Stiller: the rapid shooting sequence in *The Log-roller's Bride* was to be bigger and bolder than those that Stiller had filmed.

In the key sequence in Karu's film, Hanna Nuottaniemi acts as the navigating officer on a raft, as she and a band of men attempt to rescue a group of shipwrecked log drivers stranded on a big rock in the midst of dangerous Kohiseva rapids. From the film's screenplay, one discovers that the sequence was meant to contain 'close-ups' of Hanna shouting commands on the raft with her hair flying in the wind as waves splash against her body. In the early twenties, the term close-up was not clearly defined in Finnish language: it could mean any shot smaller than the full shot. Even so, it is clear that Karu did not think about technological issues as he wrote the screenplay. This turned out to be a problem, as Karu's company, Suomi-Filmi, did not own a telephoto lens; that is, a lens of long focal length that affects a scene's perspective by enlarging distant planes and making them seem close to the foreground planes. According to David Bordwell, international filmmakers employed such lenses when they shot chases, stunts or explosions. Their works probably gave Karu the notion that heroic moments of action could be depicted in detail on film. Stiller had faced this same problem in 1919,

as he directed *The Song of the Scarlett Flower*. Three years later, when *Johan* was made, he had found a way to circumvent the issue with the innovative solution I described above.

Karu was probably not aware of how *Johan's* rapid shooting sequence had been accomplished. In any case, Stiller's solution would have been out of the question. Mankala rapids, where *The Logroller's Bride* was shot, were precarious and known for taking lives. There was simply no way that the cinematographer, Kurt Jäger, could have safely cranked his camera on a raft. Because of the grave danger involved, the rapid shooting was done only once. To get as much film footage as possible, the sequence was shot with six cameras that were placed on both sides of the stream. Therefore, the sequence repeatedly violates the 180-degree rule. As he did not have a telephoto lens, Jäger was forced to shoot the speeding raft in extreme long shots and long shots, which render details like hair flying in the wind much too small to be seen and appreciated. The stream in *The Logroller's Bride* is clearly wilder than either of those that Stiller had filmed and there are more characters in the stream, but in terms of drama the sequence is not as powerful as that in *Johan*.



Karu was not fully satisfied with the filmed footage. As the rapid shooting sequence had to be shot in extreme long shots and long shots, the characters in danger are only small details in the vast landscape. This was not what he had planned. He had wanted to film Hanna getting closer and closer to the men in danger and finally rescuing them. As the outmoded cameras that Suomi-Filmi owned had only rudimentary viewfinders, it was wiser not to pan, as it would have been difficult to keep the action in the frame. The actual moment of rescue was replaced with an intertitle: 'The raft touched the rocks and in the blink of an eye the men were saved.' To compensate for the distant placement of the cameras, frames were masked—probably during printing—with a hard matte, which rendered portions of the frames black. The use of mattes created, in a sense, tighter framings. The function of the masks is to guide the spectator to pay more attention to the characters than to the surroundings amidst which they move. In those shots in which the camera is close to Hanna as she shouts commands, the raft was tied to the shore with ropes, a fact which was hidden from the audience with the mattes. These shots are not as dramatic as those seen in Johan. Considering that the mattes are unevenly shaped, it is probable that Karu got the idea from Ernst Lubitsch's *The Wildcat* (*Die Bergkatze*, 1921), which had premiered in Finland two years earlier. But whereas Lubitsch found peculiarly shaped frames

aesthetically pleasing, Karu was forced to use them due to the technological limitations he had faced.



Finnish audiences fell in love with *The Logroller's Bride*. The rapid shooting sequence was a major box office attraction and critics praised it. One reviewer even mentions that there were always people standing in front of the film theatre Kino Palatsi, looking at a lobby card depicting the event. It is fair to assume that many spectators were familiar with rapid shooting from literature and painting, but the cinematic representation was something different. Film, many theoreticians claim, is the most realistic of all art forms, as it can make the spectator feel like an eye-witness to the events it portrays. Some reviewers argued that the rapid shooting sequence is so daring that it could not have been done anywhere else than in Finland. The brave actors themselves, it was claimed, had been on the raft in the wildly dangerous stream whereas Lars Hanson – who plays Olaf in *The Song of the Scarlett Flower* – had been replaced by a professional log driver. Indeed, the only advantage of not having/using telephoto lenses was the possibility to replace actors with log drivers, as that fact was hidden

from the view of the audience in large shot scales. It is difficult to say how much truth there was in these claims, but many undoubtedly believed the hype. For those who did, *The Logroller's Bride's* rapid shooting sequence was undoubtedly the bravest and boldest of all rapid shootings ever filmed, even if it was technically a far cry from what Stiller had achieved in *Johan*.

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